

Knickerbocker

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THE FAMILY NAME KNICKERBOCKER is a well-known synonym for institutions of Dutch origin or ancestry, particularly those associated with the early Dutch colony in what is now New York. This is wholly the result of Washington Irving's *Knickerbocker History of New York*, as he acknowledges in an "apology" written in 1848: "When I find [this book's] very name become a 'household word' and used to give the home stamp to everything recommended for popular acceptance, such as Knickerbocker societies, Knickerbocker insurance companies. . . — and when I find New Yorkers of Dutch descent priding themselves on being 'genuine Knickerbockers,' — I please myself with the persuasion that I have struck the right chord."

Irving himself was acquainted with members of the Knickerbocker family. Moreover, he identified the fictional Diedrich Knickerbocker as a relative of the flesh and blood Knickerbockers. Thus his use of the name to typify anything Dutch was intended as an elaborate compliment. He even included in the *History* a mock etymology of the name: "Lastly came the Knickerbockers, of the great town of Schaghtikoke, where the folk lay stones on their houses in windy weather, lest they should be blown away. These derive their name, as some say, from *Knicker*, to shake, and *Beker*, a goblet, indicating thereby that they were sturdy toss-pots of yore; but, in truth, it was derived from *Knicker*, to nod, and *Boeken*, books; plainly meaning that they were great nodders or dozers over books."

The etymology *knikker*, "a clay marble," and *bakker*, "a baker," thus "a baker of clay marbles," is not here mentioned by Irving, nor apparently anywhere in his writings. Yet it seems incredible that a person who could contrive such fanciful explanations as those given above should not have hit upon the far more obvious one, for Irving was familiar with Dutch. One gets the impression that

everyone concerned was aware of the "marble-baker" etymology, but that Irving was indulging in a sophisticated kind of punning. Indeed, in his *Annals of Albany* (1852) [Vol. 3], Joel Munsell translates a number of family names and comments as follows on Knickerbocker:

Knickerbakker, marble baker; now almost universally written Knickerbocker, after the usage of Washington Irving; pronounced as if written K'n-nik-ker-bok-ker perhaps to distinguish it from *nikker*, a fiend or devil.

George Castor Martin in *The Knickerbacker or Knickerbocker Family* (1912) asserts that the first of this family of whom there is record was Jan or John VanBeighen Knickerbacker, third son of Godfrey, Count of Gunbaghen, who was a Captain in the navy of Holland. He is reputed to have seen service in Brazil and afterward in the Dutch army. He was married in Holland and later emigrated to America. Whether he actually ever used the name Knickerbacker appears uncertain. He did have a son, Hermen Jansen Knickerbacker, who was an officer in the navy of Holland and who took part in the Battle of Soleby in 1672. Martin states that he was wounded in the knee in the engagement and retired from the service, following his father to America.

We have here a satisfactory Dutch etymology for what is unquestionably a Dutch name, and we have at least one historical person to whom it belonged. This etymology, however, is far from acceptable to some of the persons who have borne the name. In fact, a stout negative report was entered some forty years ago by Kathlyne Knickerbacker Viele in her *Sketches of the Allied Families Knickerbacker Viele*.

Here is her statement in its entirety:

The name of Knickerbacker is unique. It seems safe to assert that there has never been but one family of that name. It is evident from the testimony that it is constructed out of a combination of a family name and an individual peculiarity. There has never before been offered a rational solution of its meaning.

For several years four others besides myself-- all of whom have had experience in the unraveling of the origin of Dutch names--have given to this matter a good deal of thought and one theory after another has been run down without arriving at any satisfactory decision. It has been adventured that the name represented part of an old Holland family name, but all the combinations seemed far fetched; that the ancestor's signature bore traces of lacking a syllable as would be the case perhaps in the writing of an illiterate man; but the syllable omitted could not be determined. It has been thought that the name denoted the occupation of the possessor and the Dutch dictionary has been searched for words whose combination

would indicate what that was. There seems to be absolutely nothing to make *knikkel* — marbles and *backer* — baker — — a baker of marbles, the etymology of the name. The name was never authoritatively written with “el” for the second syllable. This suggestion is given in the third volume of Munsell’s *Annals*, p. 59; but a note to the preface of the seventh volume says that Knickerbacker “was not the original name.” [Actually the quotation given is out of context. Munsell had no intention of withdrawing or even qualifying his earlier statement]. This statement of Munsell as to probable meaning has been widely copied.

It is probable that the name is to be read just as the ancestor wrote it at the foot of the legal document of 1682. The Dutch always signed their family names to legal documents. The late Walter Kenneth Griffin, an excellent genealogist, has well said, “Dutch names may be puzzling but they are logical and consistent.”

Hermen Jansen Knickerbacker, as he came to be called, was first most frequently spoken of as “Hermen Jansen van Bommel.” This was the name of the place in Holland that he hailed from. But to his contract with Anthony van Schaiek in 1682 he signs himself “Hermen Jansen van Wyekyback(e).” Why not take this just as he has written it and give it at least a logical interpretation?

Hermen Jansen came from Bommel, in North Brabant, near which there was then and had been for several centuries a branch of the ancient family of Van Wye in which the names of Herman and Johannes were very common. As far back as the fourteenth century there was a Hermen VanWye who was governor of the Neder-Betuwe, where the fortified town of Bommel was situated.

The family tradition says that Hermen Jansen was in the Dutch navy, and although this has not been proven, there is nothing to prevent its having been true. He is said to have been with DeRuyter’s fleet in the Battle of Soleby, fought June 7, 1672, and to have been there wounded. I doubt if an unwritten tradition would have done more than have handed down the facts of his fighting and of his wound. Therefore when I found that in the next year (1673) there had been a still more fierce and sanguinary battle fought by the same fleet under the same commanders at a place called Kijk, I could not but note its similarity to the “Kyc” in the ancestor’s name, especially when “back” (cheek) gave such an easy reading as — Hermen Jansen vanWye-Kijk-back — Kijk cheek — or cheek marked at Kijk!

In the effort to read the name, the “Wye” which might easily be mistaken for “Nye” (it has been read in both ways by different clerks), was so interpreted and the name became Niekickbacker — Niekerbacker, from which the transition was easy to the final form of Knickerbacker.

The clerk in the first document, that of 1682, writes the name Kinne-ker-backer. Kinneback is jawbone — kinnekyckbacker — man with the Kijk-jawbone, falls into line as a suggestion, but as to form it is more far-fetched.

There is no such name as Knickerbacker in Holland and since we have the signature of the ancestor to go by we must bear in mind that he does not call himself Knickerbacker, but “vanWyekyback(e).”

It is from this signature that the origin of the name and the man must be traced.

The above is scarcely a model in onomastics. To refute one by one its logical fallacies, however, would constitute needless labor.

Especially obvious is the jump from one battle in which this ancestor is conjectured to have taken part to another battle a year later, and from a rumored wound (disregarding Martin's assertion that he was struck in the knee) to being able to locate it precisely on the person. Even more fanciful, if such a thing is possible, is the assumption that the Dutch ever indulged in the practice of naming people for injuries they sustained at various geographical locations in specific anatomical members. The speaker of American English would find wholly ridiculous such analogical inventions as Bulge-arm, New Guinea-shin, or Korea-shoulder.

To argue that because this person's name was Hermen, he must have been a VanWye simply because the VanWyes were often called Hermen or Johannes does not strike one as a singularly fortunate assertion either. Nearly every Dutch family with a score or more of males normally has one or more persons named Hermen or Johannes.

But since the writer is so sure that Knickerbacker must have been derived from Wyekyckbacke, her procedure deserves some attention. There are, as she admits, a number of early municipal and church records in which Hermen Jansen's name turns up. In all there are no fewer than eighteen different combinations of names. It is true, the Wyekyckbacke spelling is the only one in Hermen Jansen's handwriting, all the others being in the writing of various clerks. Nevertheless, there can be no fundamental objection to using a spelling which appeared some fifteen years after the date of the signature: Hermen Jansen Knickerbacker Van Wyye. VanWye, after all, is not to be regarded as merely part of Wyekyckbacke, but as a completely independent name. Those familiar with Dutch naming practices (even as late as the early part of the nineteenth century in some parts of the northern provinces) will recognize a familiar pattern. It was quite indifferent whether one was VanWye Knickerbacker or Knickerbacker VanWye. The only stable element in the name was the Hermen. For the rest he was Jansen or VanBommel, or both, or Jansen or Knickerbacker, or both.

It is extremely doubtful that the Kycbacke of the signature has any connection with a place Kijk or with a cheek or jawbone. Here is an illiterate, or at best a semi-literate man trying to write a long and unwieldy name in a community generally unconcerned about

any kind of consistency in writing or recording names. Such a spelling is about what one would anticipate. It certainly seems highly improbable that Wyekyckbacke should eventually become Knickerbocker because some clerk could not distinguish a W from an N. Names are passed on by word of mouth rather than by signatures on obscure documents.

The writer's abrupt dismissal of the obvious etymology and her elaborate reaching for another suggests that the first one represents something distasteful. So it may well be, depending on how one looks at it. The "marble-baker" etymology is tossed out on two counts: first, it could not have been *knikkel* and *bakker*, because the "el" is insufficiently authenticated. Actually nobody ever suggested that it was *knikkel* at all, but *knikker*. And for that matter the spelling *Knikkelbakker* is given two times in the records. Secondly, she insists, "marble-baker" cannot have been an occupational term. The point is that it does not have to be. Very probably there never was an ancestor of the Knickerbocker family who made a living rolling Dutch clay into little balls. If Hermen Jansen was, as evidence indicates, a soldier of fortune, why could not "marble baker" have been a good natured nickname conferred on him by his companions. Surnames which were originally nicknames are extremely common among the Dutch. If taken literally they often border on the grotesque, as witness *Notekraker*, "nut-cracker"; *Bontekoe*, "spotted cow"; *Botbijn* "dull ax"; *Aardappel*, "potato"; not to mention the names of most wild and domesticated animals.

There can be no doubt that Knickerbocker is derived, as Munsell stated, from *knikker-bakker*. What this meant to the Dutch adventurer of the seventeenth century will probably never be known, and our guesses will likely be as far wide of the mark as the twenty-third century guesses at expressions like "feather merchant," "yard bird," or "dog robber." It may simply have amused Hermen Jansen enough to have induced him eventually to adopt it as his official surname, in preference to what he perhaps regarded as the colorless *VanBommel*.